

Supervising mentors' lived experience on supervision in teaching, nursing and social care education. A participation-oriented phenomenological study

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Abstract Research concerning the supervisor role in separate educational programmes has been undertaken, but cross-professional studies are few. The aim of this study was to explore the lived experience of supervising mentors in Sweden during the practice-based, off-campus sections of the education in teaching, nursing, and social care. The study used a participatory phenomenological approach in which four researchers and nineteen supervising mentors worked together in the research process which was accomplished in four different phases. The data collecting method used was interview. The results constituted a main essence entitled “Struggle of power and control of professional quality enhancement” built upon four themes: “Constitutes a motivating force”, “Feelings of responsibility”, “Feelings of frustration” and “Wishes for alteration”. Conclusions from the study are that communication, information and contact between the professionals in the fields and university teachers need to be strengthened to keep up supervising mentors’ motivating force and to give them support.

Keywords Cross-professional · Lived experience · Mentorship · Nurse education · Phenomenological analysis · Social care education · Supervision · Teacher education · Work-based learning

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Introduction

Vocational education at the university

Within the university there are educations with a similar structure building on theory and practice. Vocational education as teacher, nurse and social care education have all theoretical parts and parts where students during a stipulated period of time are practising in the field. One question that has been discussed is what content is best taught at the university and what content is appropriate to learn in practice. Vocational education has also since long been fraught with the tension between theoretical and practical knowledge and the difference in between (Rafferty et al. 1996). Generally “learning by doing” is seen as an important part of individual development in many professions and the advent of evidence-based practice provides demands for recurrent evaluations and objective-settings (Skinner and Whyte 2004). The experiential elements of a vocational education to become a teacher, a nurse or a social care worker are considered to have significance, in providing the students with opportunities to obtain professional knowledge and skills essential for their future professions (Chesser-Smyth 2005; Council on Social Work Education 2001; Daresh 1990). Supervision during the off-campus periods have been regarded to be crucial to ensure good outcomes. Benner et al. (1996) considers that experienced professionals’ knowledge is of a kind that is not available in classrooms. Although of importance, the professionals’ experience concerning their supervision in the practical parts has received limited attention. This fact with knowledge of supervision delimit within each separate education have raised questions about the joint knowledge of supervision of students during the period of practising in the field. It has also been questioned whether there is a wider and more general knowledge that can increase the understanding for those involved in the different educations to facilitate understanding and contacts.

Co-operation between the university and working life

Integration of theory and practice is more effective when there are strong links between the university and the fieldwork (Lauvås and Handal 1993). Objectives for the development of co-operation were to direct higher education towards the needs of working life and to develop vocational education with its theoretical and practical knowledge. Professional requirements and demands have also supported an increase in interaction, co-operation and a closer collaboration between the university and working life (Tynjälä et al. 2003). The universities in Sweden have a tradition of co-operation with the surrounding society. The development started in the late 1960s. On behalf of the Swedish parliament the state universities in 1996 gave guidelines to develop and strengthen the collaboration with the society outside the academia, and to develop the communication from one-way to two-way (SFS 1996). An evidence-led approach to practice development requires close working relationships between the academic institutions and the representatives from the field to ensure a two-way flow of information about current policy and practice issues (Skinner and Whyte 2004). In the Netherlands, for instance, fundamental changes took place in co-operation with respect to institutes for teacher education, when schools became more involved in teacher education and also influenced the content of the curriculum (Snoek 2003). Connections seemed to be strengthened and the curriculum was made more flexible and competence based. Stevens (1999) outlined a vision of school–university partnership where one of the stone corners was collaborative enquiry and school and university

teachers were collaborative partners. The introduction in Ireland of a ward-based clinical education facilitator is described as a creation of healthcare organization partnership with the university (Lambert and Glacken 2005). From the field of social care, formal links between academic institutions and agencies which allow both parties to contribute to research, evaluation and service effectiveness seem to be essential, according to Skinner and Whyte (2004).

Similarities and differences in the educations

Teacher and nurse education have a long history internationally as well as nationally in Sweden. Social care is a young education, about 20 years in Sweden, and belongs to the broad profession of social work with diverse practices relating to people's well-being within social contexts. It is dictated by the pattern of social welfare arrangements at a national, state or local community level. Social care education is specialized in particular fields of welfare provision (Barnes and Hugman 2002). At our university, University of Gävle, social care education is directed towards disabled and elderly people.

Teacher, nurse and social care education have much in common, that is, they are directed towards the development and support of human beings, within a social perspective. Higher Education Ordinance (SFS 1993) regulates the objectives for educations belonging to the Swedish university system. Analyses of the documents for teacher, nurse and social care education show many similarities. Objectives concern aspects of teaching, information to others concerned, and value foundations in the profession. In teacher education objectives also concern systematization of one's own and others' experience, while in nursing education planning, leadership and co-ordination of care work are pointed out. To lead and develop social care is emphasized in social care education. It is also an explicit aim in all three programmes that the students undergo personal development during their studies (Morberg et al. 2001).

Neumann (2001) discusses teaching in some disciplines and framework at the university. In regard to classroom teaching practices soft fields in undergraduate education, which teacher, nurse and social care can be considered to belong to, focus is on student growth and development, and oral, and written, and communication skill. Hard fields place stronger emphasis on students' research experience.

The main part of the education to become a teacher, nurse and social care worker takes place at the university and a smaller part is practising in the field. The amount of time the students spend practicing varies between different universities and from one country to another. In the University of Gävle in Sweden, the practical parts of the programmes constitute approximately 12–25%.

Supervision of students in the practical field

In the literature many different terms are used for professionals employed in the field whom students are assigned to work alongside and be supervised by. In teacher education supervision is carried out by an instructor, evaluator, coach or mentor (Anderson and Shannon 1988; Hawkey 1997). In nursing education the title of supervisor is used (Fowler 1996), but terms such as preceptor and mentor are also used inter-changeably (Wilson-Barnett et al. 1995). When the word mentor is used it means that they have a significant role in the students' learning providing educational and personal support (Earnshaw 1995; Andrews and Wallis 1999). Supervision in social care education is performed by a

supervisor (Goorapah 1997), practice teacher (Furness and Gilligan 2004), or field instructor (Moore et al. 2004). The literature on the practical elements in these educational programmes offers no consensus for the title of this person.

Supervision as it is presented in literature includes being the student's manager and assessing the students' personal and professional development and self-awareness (Barber and Norman 1987; Löfmark and Thorell-Ekstrand 2004). Supervision is also focused on management and support, and the role is to teach, debrief, coach, assess, and to challenge the student (Goorapah 1997; Davys and Beddoe 2000). In this study the concept of 'supervising mentor' will be used to designate these professionals. His/her tasks are to be a mentor, supervisor and teacher all at the same time. In the Swedish University system there are expectations on supervision from the university described in guidelines to give the students individual help and guidance, to give an introduction to all the different aspects of the profession and to support a reflective approach to the profession and its circumstances.

Supervision in the off-campus practice is supposed to function as a bridge between theoretical and applied education for the development of students' theory for practice, and therefore of special importance (Lauvås and Handal 1993). Research on the off-campus part of the students' education is limited (Ramsden 1992; Ryan and Toohey 1996). Aspects such as encouraging a reflective approach (Walkington 2005), role function, and necessity of organizational framework and to have models for supervision have been emphasized (Davys and Beddoe 2000; Landmark et al. 2003). Some benefits and challenges are described for the supervising mentor, e.g. in nursing education the possibilities are to improve one's own teaching skills and opportunities to share knowledge with the student (Dibert and Goldenberg 1995; Öhring 2000). Experience of one's own education and previous experience of being supervised are important for supervisors' own understanding of the situation, according to Öhring (2000). A consulting role that acknowledges individuality seems more effective in the development of a teacher identity than the traditional supervision model that focuses mainly on socialization. However, the experienced person who supervises a student during a practice period often does so with little guidance or with little understanding of what the university education entails (Walkington 2005). Experiences from social care education are that many professionals supervise only to help an off-campus co-ordinator who is desperately looking for student placements. The student supervisor situation can therefore be a stressful and unpleasant and far from a well-planned ideal in social care education (Davys and Beddoe 2000).

The supervising mentors have for their task access to the curriculum and study guides. The university compensate the organizations in which the students are doing their practical part of the education. Payment is not given by the university to the individual supervising mentor but sometimes they receive compensation in the form of time given by the employer or the organization is offered teaching by the university.

In the literature there are only a few examples where more than one university education is included in the data collection in a study concerning supervision in the practical field of the education. Mamchur and Myrick (2003) explored the nature of the conflict in supervision experiences of students and supervising mentors in teaching, nursing and social care education. Conflicts were reported as quite widespread. The supervising mentor's expectations were the most common cause of conflict according to both students and supervising mentors. The purpose of Mamchur and Myrick's study was to interpret descriptions of the mentoring supervisors' experiences that could contribute to better understanding of the supervisor role and not be limited to one type of education. The professionals involved could, as an additional benefit, also obtain experience of participating in a research project.

Supervision seminars at the university

The academic environment in Sweden since early 1990s, like in other countries, have been extraordinary and worldwide changed, for instance in structure, in functioning and in financing. The groups of students at the university are larger and more diversified in terms of student ability, motivation and cultural background. Many factors such as class size, increased student intake, fewer staff and new courses affect the programmes (Biggs 2003). This situation created a need to strengthen the collaboration with professionals in the practical fields and in 2000 a series of seminars for supervising mentorship in teaching, nursing and social care education were arranged at the University of Gävle. Faculty members, students and professionals in these fields participated. Each seminar focused on one of the named educational programmes and was introduced by a short historical overview of the programme, presentation of the content of the curriculum, overview of the distribution of university and off-campus sections and a presentation of research into supervision in each programme. One seminar focused on the first years in the profession, the induction years.

Every seminar contained discussions in smaller groups where participants could share different perspectives on the subjects presented. The main results and the participants' own experience confirmed that the three educational programmes had very much in common (Morberg et al. 2001). Further co-operation and ideas for investigation were deliberated in the discussion groups. Additional discussions among the seminar leaders at the university provided premises for a research project where supervision in the off-campus parts was an area of the researchers' interest.

Aim

The aim of the present study was to explore the lived experience of being a supervising mentor during the practice-based, off-campus section in the education for the professions of teacher, nurse and social care.

Method

Research design

In order to build upon the results of the preparatory seminars and to strengthen the collaboration between faculty members and professionals a participatory design as described by Holmer and Starrin (1993) was chosen. In such a research method the participants are involved in initial planning, deciding aim and analysis and also in discussions of how the results from the project could be used (Holmer and Starrin 1993).

Research method

A phenomenological approach was utilised to describe the experience as it is lived. According to Karlsson (1995) descriptive phenomenology represents the participants' 'life world' and the participants' interpretations of their experiences.

Participants

Twenty-two supervising mentors replied to an invitation and 19 participated throughout the study. They represented three academic programmes: teaching ($n = 11$), nursing ($n = 6$)

and social care ($n = 2$). Seven were born during the 40s, eight in the 50s, two in the 60s, one in the 70s and birth year for one was missing. Seventeen were women and two were men. Inclusion criteria were experience of supervision of students but no lower limitations were set for experience. The four researchers represented different disciplines; education, nursing, sociology and psychology.

Settings

The University of Gävle is a small regional university located in the middle part of Sweden. Its educational profile is similar to other regional universities and focuses on education of teachers, nurses, social workers, engineers and economists, and subject field as humanities, natural science, mathematics and social science.

What distinguishes the University of Gävle from other regional universities in Sweden, especially further south, is its strong connection with the surrounding society, which was one of the prerequisites for the project.

Data collection

In order to grasp the experiences semi-structured qualitative interviews with the supervising mentors were carried out by the four researchers. The subjects of the conversations, based on the participant's own suggestions during the initial work with the research design, were open and wide and more like areas to reflect upon. They were asked to tell about subjects concerning their role as being supervising mentor, what it meant to themselves and in relation to students, colleagues, staff management, university, and family.

Procedure for participation

The procedure was accomplished in four separate phases and five different meetings.

Phase one

Supervising mentors in teaching, nursing and social care education were invited to participate in the research project through personal invitations and invitations to the workplaces and the unions. Meetings were planned at three different locations in the region, and they could choose which one they preferred. A fourth meeting with an additional invitation was added when it was found out that social care participants were missing. The reduced number of supervising mentors from social work education might be explained by the fact that this is a newer education at the university with fewer students in comparison with teaching and nursing education.

The first meeting started with a presentation by the researchers of the history of supervision in teaching, nursing and social care education and a brief overview of research methods in general and of participatory project methods according to Holmer and Starrin (1993) in particular. Many aspects concerning supervision were discussed at each place and suggestions were made of possible areas for investigation. After the four meetings, the researchers put together the various suggestions into a research proposal that included aim and methods, which was sent out to the participants, who were asked to support or reject the proposal and/or to give suggestions for change. The entire group of participants representing teaching, nursing and social care education agreed on the project's focusing on experience of being a supervising mentor and the use of interview method for generating data.

Phase two

The interviews were carried out at three geographical locations as planned. Each of the four researchers interviewed four to five of the supervising mentors, one by one. The distribution was arbitrary. The only requirement was that the interviewer should not know the interviewee personally. The interviews took about 45–60 min and were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were sent back with permission to the interviewees for approval. Two participants requested some minor changes.

Phase three

The participants took part in two group meetings during phase three. In the first meeting the researchers gave information about the planning of extensive procedure for analysing the material and the supervising mentors' participation. The participants were then given opportunities to analyse the data from half of the interviews. At the second meeting they were presented with results which summarized the preliminary themes from the analysis sessions at the three different locations.

Phase four

A draft of this article was sent out and discussed during a group meeting before the final version was prepared.

Procedure for data reduction and analysis

The reduction and analysis of the data from the interviews was inspired by phenomenology (Karlsson 1995) and was accomplished in five stages.

1. Half of the interviews were chosen for the first step of the analysis. The researchers carefully read the transcripts and discussed the content. Parts not connected to the aim of the study were left aside.
2. Transcriptions of the interviews were cut into small parts and printed with enlarged typefaces with one statement on each sheet (in some cases a longer single statement was placed on two sheets of paper). From these texts the researchers sorted the statements into four areas related to the aim of the study in order to give the professionals an outline to work from.
3. All participants were given the same set of 150 sheets with statements arranged in four areas (see Procedure for participation, phase 3). The processes of condensing the statements into meaning units and abstracting the meaning units into themes were done concurrently with discussions between the participants at each location.
4. The researchers summarized and synthesized the three sets of preliminary themes, which differed from each other to some extent, into one structure of themes (see Procedure for participation, phase 3).
5. The text from the other part of interviews was read carefully by the researchers and the themes from the first part of the interviews were used as a structure for analysing the second part. After discussions where themes were compared and combined in the whole original text, a general structure of four somewhat readjusted themes was established and an essence was formulated. In order to verify the themes and essence

of supervising mentorship, participative verification was realised through feedback to and from the informants (see Procedure for participation, phase 3).

Ethical considerations

The supervising mentors participated on a voluntary basis and were informed in the invitation letter, and later orally, that they were free to leave the project at any time. They also received information on how the material and the results would be presented assuring confidentiality, e.g. that it could not be possible to associate opinions expressed in the interviews with an individual person. They were offered the possibility to read, approve and correct the transcriptions of their own interviews as well as the draft version of the article.

Trustworthiness

Polit and Beck (2004) suggest that the trustworthiness as a criterion should be made intrinsic to the research process. Credibility was supported by the four researchers' overall responsibility to analyse and interpret the data, a form of investigator triangulation, which provides a combination of expertise and diverse research training backgrounds. In phenomenological studies bracketing is the strategy to control bias in reflections on experience and it refers to objectivity, which was awarded great importance through recurrent discussions between the researchers. The design of the study supported transferability through continuous collaboration between the researchers and the text by returning repeatedly to the transcripts. Also the participatory design made it possible to evaluate the applicability of the data analysis by repeated meetings with the professionals. The method of analysing in steps is helpful, although the most important aspect in this type of analysis is to adopt a phenomenological attitude towards the text, which means to strive to enter the life-world of the interviewees, holding back one's own pre-understanding of the phenomena.

Results

The results constitute of a main essence entitled "Struggle of power and control of professional quality enhancement" built upon four themes: "Constitutes a motivating force", "Feelings of responsibility", "Feelings of frustration" and "Wishes for alteration". Statements concerning the theme "Constitutes a motivating force" were in majority in comparison with statements supporting the other three themes. They were more equally distributed. The results are presented with comments from the supervising mentors and marked with their professions.

Constitutes a motivating force

Supervision is experienced as a motive force emanating from different sources. Meetings with the individual student lead to development in the role as a teacher and a supervising mentor.

I think that I get so much from my students, and because of this my role as teacher develops and so does my role as supervisor, depending on who my candidates are—they are so different from each other. (Teacher)

It gives me a lot. And above all, it can be an excellent forum for discussion between us, and that develops one." (Social care)

The students come with their fresh eyes and in the talks their visions may be seen.

I am willing to supervise students and I think it's interesting because they come with new ideas. One gets a qualified partner for discussion and sees from where the visions come. (Teacher)

I'm a supervisor because I think it's fun to discuss things with people who are new, who come with fresh points of view. It means I cannot rely or fall back on routines, but I actually have to think about why I do so. (Nurse)

The students contribute to stimulating discussions.

I think it's great fun to be a supervisor. You meet students on an entirely different level. I've had great luck, in fact. They love to discuss. I get into the literature they're reading and I think that's great! (Teacher)

The meeting with the students can also result in new thoughts.

When I sit and talk with the students afterwards, I come up with my own questions to think about. (Teacher)

The discussions can create thinking with broader perspectives and questioning.

/I asked/ what literature are you reading now? And so I began reading, taking one book at a time, and then discussing /it/. You get a little broader perspective on the whole thing. (Teacher)

I think that it keeps one from just rushing ahead, just this having questions when the students arrive. To question in a positive way. (Teacher)

The individual student is seen a resource in the work team.

Students are a breath of fresh air in the work team when they participate in our meetings and make their voices heard. (Nurse)

The motivating force from the students is there even in hardworking situations.

I see students as giving me the grounds for going on. (Teacher)

The motive force in supervision is also supervision as such. It contributed to development of their own.

The better the education, the better my future colleagues will be. I work with supervision for wholly selfish reasons. (Nurse)

I experience it as very positive, partly because I offer and receive ideas. I get a period of concentration...with pedagogical discussions which one otherwise never has on one's own level. (Teacher)

To supervise gives possibilities to be informed e.g. about what is happening at the university.

The driving force /for me/ was that I wanted a natural connection to the university. (Nurse)

I'm satisfied with getting reports of what goes on at the university. (Teacher)

It gives possibilities to follow changes in the education programmes.

... it's interesting to monitor the programmes, to see how they change...it's a way of keeping up. I'd definitely like to continue as a supervisor. (Nurse)

Supervision in relation to colleagues and staff management represent two other sources of motivation—if not so evident as the students.

In any case they (colleagues) think it's fun (Nurse)

I think that the management has great confidence in the supervisors and feel... well, that they don't need to interfere... (Teacher)

Feelings of responsibility

Responsibility is part of the role as supervising mentors. They feel responsible for the students' practice in the field, even if everyone is not aware of this responsibility and the task is heavy.

Don't think that everybody understands that supervisors have a lot of responsibilities today...sometimes it feels like too many. (Teacher)

The supervising mentors feel that they contribute towards being a link between the university and the fieldwork.

I think that the university doesn't have time to keep up with the major changes that take place outside it, but one becomes a link between the two. I think that's our future. (Teacher)

They also consider the education at the university to be too theoretical and therefore somewhat difficult to understand. Supervision might compensate for that. The supervising mentors mention that the practical part in the field will be of importance when the students are back at the university.

One hopes that the practical experience they get with us will reward them when they return to university. (Teacher)

To be a supervising mentor is also to take responsibility for future colleagues. If the colleagues are well-educated, that will be of great benefit for the supervising mentors themselves.

To feel responsibility for the new teachers who will be taking over. It's in the job to take responsibility, to help those who will be new teachers...We'll benefit from it later. (Nurse)

Supervision is an important part of recruiting new colleagues.

One must take good care of the students, otherwise no one will want to work with us. (Nurse)

Responsibility in the supervision situation is given to the students as well, who are responsible for expressing their own needs and demands.

They know that when they come to me, one prerequisite is that they say what they demand of me as a supervisor. (Teacher)

Feelings of frustration

Lack of collaboration with the university is what the supervising mentors often call into question. They feel frustrated because of the lack of personal contact with the university, and think that contact would strengthen their role as mentors.

I have no personal contact with the university...and I think //I should, that supervisors should meet there sometimes in order to strengthen our role outside. (Teacher)

The supervising mentors feel there are no clear instructions for their supervising task:

There are no clear rules for what we should be doing. Actually, there are no instructions or regulations for what a supervisor should do...We work more or less on the basis of feelings. (Nurse)

The supervising mentors observe that their role and the view of learning has changed; both are getting less distinct. They gave the example of working in teams where it is not evident who has the real responsibility.

I think that the role of the supervisor has changed significantly - just as learning has changed. Both have developed and possibly become less clear.... Today we often share supervision because we work in teams. We have more or less responsibility, but it is unclear who has the real responsibility. (Teacher)

They also question their own role in the educational programmes.

What actually is our function in them? I think they should take up more time and that graduates should have the right competence. (Nurse)

To get less time for allocated tasks is also frustrating. The task of being a supervising mentor is experienced as being laid on top of their ordinary job.

We have less and less time and so supervision becomes simply a burden loaded on us by the management. The head principal wants a partner school and so the job of supervisor is added from above. (Teacher)

Frustration is also directed towards the students' education, which they think is less good. They feel that they even have to act as teachers for the students, since the university education has changed and declined.

Today we have to be teacher for them as well, since I think that teacher training has worsened so much during the years I've been a supervisor. (Nurse)

They felt secure when they themselves had finished their education, but today the students feel insecure.

We were secure when we graduated, but today students feel uncertain. (Teacher)

Wish for alteration

The supervising mentors want other circumstances for their task. They wish supervision were a natural part of their work, and supported financially. This presupposes support from the teachers at the university.

That it /supervision/ was integrated into the work of teachers in a way that it would feel natural. At the same time some schools that receive students would feel that we receive remuneration because we work extra...Then we would also need support from the teachers at the university. (Nurse)

They express a need and a demand for special education for supervising mentors.

I'm not sure I understand right, but I think that supervisor training will be demanded. Such is the case in other professions. Those who do supervision should be trained for the job. (Nurse)

They suggest that the university teachers should go out to the workplaces to reduce the gap between the world at school and the world at the workplace.

I wish that /university/ teachers...that the school went out to the workplaces more. There's the school and there's the workplace. School is a world in itself and the workplace ditto. And they're not exactly on the same wavelength, no. (Nurse)

In their collaboration they want better input from university faculty members:

Even better cooperation, even more injections from the university! (Teacher)

They want closer contact and a stronger connection between the workplace and the university and they want changes in the supervising mentors' role, which also has been discussed before.

It's just this—the contact between university and supervisor. That's one thing I wish were different, that there was a clearer connection. We talk about this and the supervisor's changed role. (Social care worker)

Discussion

According to the discussion by Kekälä (2000) the research that we have performed can in part be seen as constructivism research and there is quite clear that consistent with such a perspective there are forms of power and control issues hidden in our findings. The experience of being a supervising mentor in teaching, nursing, and social care education incorporated four themes building the essence “Struggle of power and control in the professional quality enhancement”. The themes that were uncovered revealed that the experience was ambiguous. The themes ‘constitutes a motivating force’ and ‘feelings of responsibility’ reflected a constructive strength and awareness about how supervision may contribute to professional growth not only for the supervising mentor but also for the student. The themes ‘feelings of frustration’ and ‘wishes for alteration’ showed that there were also hindrances to achieve professional development. In some of the comments there were however signs that could be interpreted as if they saw possibilities for development. Supervising mentors expressed a wish for more contact with the university that could strengthen their role. Also special education for their supervising task was emphasized.

The supervising mentors' motivating force was the students who provided them with opportunities to improve their teaching skills and to share new knowledge—also described by Dibert and Goldenberg (1995) and Öhrling (2000). The situation was less of the master who was educating the apprentice, but more of equal and sharing partners (Lauvås and Handal 1993). The students were qualified discussion partners, offering creative thinking and new perspectives. One of those interviewed even described supervision of students as a possibility to get work done. Supervision involved a motivating force for the individual as well as a resource for the work team. How the supervising mentors' colleagues and the management viewed the supervision task was not a salient feature, although, the mentors indicated that they received support and felt they were given confidence.

The supervising mentors experienced that their role consisted of possibilities for reflection and stimulating dialogue with students. Reflection is often described as relevant to the professional development of persons in an educational situation. It involves taking time to think, analyse, discuss, and question (Zeichner 1982). It also includes evaluation and thinking differently (Calderhead 1989). Until the 1980s, the supervision process consisted of acting as a model for teaching activities. Since then the focus has shifted towards reflection, with the supervising mentor more of a partner for dialogue and co-operation (Franke and Dahlgren 1996; Walkington 2005). From the students' point of view reflection is helpful for such aspects as growing in professional identity and into a more independent role (Stokking et al 2003). This motivation for dialogue can also be transferred to a work team when colleagues get more involved in supervision. According to findings by Usher et al. (1999), conferring with others can also function as a quality assurance and constitute a supportive role both for the supervising mentors and the students.

The professionals saw themselves as a link between the university and the field for information about actual activities. Their responsibility involved both support for students, their future colleagues, and the quality of the education. A strong feeling of responsibility for the preparation of the students and their future role as being competent and capable of working as a colleague is in accordance with findings by Öhrling (2001). The professionals expressed suspiciousness of the strong emphasis on the theoretical content in the programme and therefore saw the practical parts as being of special importance. The responsibility for the education presupposed that the students took an active part in the partnership. Stokking et al. (2003) has emphasised the students' own preparation and off-campus period as a crucial aspect. The supervising mentors' way of expressing their responsibility for the students' education needs to be taken into consideration. One of the points made in the theme 'feelings of responsibility' is the quality of future colleagues. In the terms of Becher (1999) the supervising mentors perform both assurance and control. When providing adequate information for fulfilling the aims of the practical periods, it is an overall responsibility for the faculty at the university that the supervising mentors' experience should be taken into consideration.

Lack of contact with faculty staff and limited collaboration with the university led to frustration when the supervising mentors' need for control is not recognized. Faculty members' visits to workplaces involved expectations of reducing the gap between the theoretical education at the university and the practical education at the workplace and also to strengthen the professional role. Skinner and Whyte (2004) argue that strategies for practice learning require development of both organisations to support a more effective professional education and continued professional development. A strong partnership is one way to transfer such goals as research-based knowledge to vocational education in accordance with the demands from the theoretical side (Deans et al. 2003). Thus, a complement to this project could be, not only to extend the knowledge of supervision, but also to enhance the supervision mentors' consciousness of research.

The supervising mentors also expressed doubts and frustration about handling their task, mentioning that they had no clear instructions for their supervising work. Some of them thought that the content of the theoretical education at the university was too theoretical and difficult and felt that their supervision could be a compensation. Davys and Beddoe (2000) underline that a model for supervision with a paradigm shift grounded in an understanding of adult learning is necessary, and should contain an emphasis on learning strategies for reflective practice and process-focused as opposed to task-focused. Attention has also been paid to the fact that the supervising mentors' own education may be different

from their students. When nurses with a pre-academic education were compared in their ratings with nurses educated in the academic system, they rated newly graduated nurses competence lower (Löfmark et al. 2006). These findings can result in interpretations that education within the pre-academic system might lead to difficulties in coping in today's academic demands and causing problems when students and supervising mentors are working together (Maben and Macleod Clark 1998).

Supervising mentors argued that alterations in the input from the university and training in supervision was needed. It has been taken for granted that the professionals have the necessary requirements to do supervision; special preparations or education have not always been considered mandatory (Tveiten 2000). Supervision can be described as “professional assistance” for learning and development. The supervising mentor should not give answers, but support the students in finding the answers themselves. Good supervision is about asking the right questions (Davys and Beddoe 2000). The supervising mentors' way of interpreting their supervision task showed awareness of their changing role, although their frustration over an unclear view of education and their role seemed to be strong. Their frustration concerned lack of contact, their own position in the educational programme but also the quality of the education. Supervision has been regarded as essential for all vocational education when it is necessary to transfer experiences and skills, which cannot be done only by written information. When students are participating in different situations they should be able to develop their preparedness to act. Sarvimäki (1988) emphasizes the importance of learning in an authentic environment, where learning is related to the situation. A person with experience in the work in question is the best guide.

In a study by Hallin and Danielson (2007) the nurses' experiences of their daily work were to balance strain and stimulation. While the nurses in their study appear to be a passive and adapting part of what goes on around them the professionals in this study struggle to gain power and control of quality enhancement of their respective professions. The theme “A stimulating work situation” in the study by Hallin and Danielson (2007) resembles and partly validates our theme “Contributes a motivating force”. In addition, the nurses' experience of the need to balance strain and stimulation (Hallin and Danielson 2007) is in line with the finding that midwives experience contradictions within and between themselves and others with regard to using the labour admission test (Blix and Öhlund 2007). In a study by Blix and Öhlund (2007) midwives felt their professional identity threatened by the use of technology and someone else's control of it while in this study the professionals felt that they were the guarantees for the professional quality enhancement somehow in opposition against the university and the heads of their own organisation. Thus our study is consistent with, strengthens and extends recent research (Blix and Öhlund 2007; Hallin and Danielson 2007) within the area of nursing and midwives profession.

So far, cross-professional studies are still very rare, although envisioning more integrated working and integrated learning is not new. In the vocational education of teachers, nurses, and social care workers there are possibilities to work closely together, to share experiences and contribute to professional development. The participatory research design that was used in this study with a shared experience of the research process has prerequisite to contribute to a deeper interest in and knowledge about the participants' working situation. It may also increase the quality of the students' education when supervising mentors get their own experience of taking part in the research process. According to Hakala and Ylijoki (2001) such a research can be recognized as civil society oriented with its aim to improve pre-service work based education.

Conclusion

This study adds knowledge to supervising mentors' lived experience of supervision in teaching, nursing, and social care education. Each separate education has its own knowledge concerning supervision during the off-campus periods. To widen the view and investigate how supervision is experienced in three educations gives wider and also new knowledge. Results showed a picture of contradictory aspects, both power and obstacles for development. As supervising mentors they expressed motivation and responsibility, but they also felt frustration and wanted alterations in their situation with the aim to support the development of the students.

Two recommendations can be drawn from the results. Firstly, that the supervising mentors' motivating force, responsibility, and enthusiasm need to be further supported. They saw themselves as a link between the university and the field. A two-way flow of information about current policy and practice issues is necessary for development.

Secondly, that much of their frustration and suggestions for alterations are caused by limited contact between university teachers and the professionals in the field. The solution to this problem would be more frequent visits by university teachers to give them support.

A general conclusion is that without interaction and strong collaboration between teachers in the university and professionals in the practical fields there is no guarantee for quality in the supervision of students.

Joint projects like the present one improve the mutual understanding, of each others roles and cultures, between teachers in higher education and working life representatives. However, both parties have to allocate time and effort for the participants due to the fact that project of this art takes time. From the initial idea and the arranged seminars for supervising mentors in the three educational programs that was the starting point of this project it took nearly a decade before it was finished. As pointed out by Stevens (1999) collaborative research is one of the stone corners of a professional development partnership and as this project has shown it can help to build a shared understanding of the educational process. In order to bridge these different worlds it is essential that we create opportunities and places where representatives from higher education and working life can meet.

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